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Our Fake Drilling Debate

Collectively Hiding Behind ANWR

By George F. Will

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In 1986 Gale Norton was 32 and working for the secretary of the interior on matters pertaining to the proposal to open a small portion of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge -- area 1002 -- to drilling for oil and natural gas, a proposal that then had already been a bone of contention for several years. Today Norton is the secretary of the interior and is working on opening ANWR.

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But this interminable argument actually could end soon with Congress authorizing drilling. That would be good for energy policy and excellent for the nation's governance.

Area 1002 is 1.5 million of the refuge's 19 million acres. In 1980 a Democratically controlled Congress, at the behest of President Jimmy Carter, set area 1002 aside for possible energy exploration. Since then, although there are active oil and gas wells in at least 36 U.S. wildlife refuges, stopping drilling in ANWR has become sacramental for environmentalists who speak about it the way Wordsworth wrote about the Lake Country.

Few opponents of energy development in what they call "pristine" ANWR have visited it. Those who have and who think it is "pristine" must have visited during the 56 days a year when it is without sunlight. They missed the roads, stores, houses, military installations, airstrip and school. They did not miss seeing the trees in area 1002. There are no trees.

Opponents worry that the caribou will be disconsolate about, and their reproduction disrupted by, this intrusion by man. The same was said 30 years ago by opponents of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, which brings heated oil south from Prudhoe Bay. Since the oil began flowing, the caribou have increased from 5,000 to 31,000. Perhaps the pipeline's heat makes them amorous.

Ice roads and helicopter pads, which will melt each spring, will minimize man's footprint, which will be on a 2,000-acre plot about one-fifth the size of Dulles Airport. Nevertheless, opponents say the environmental cost is too high for what the ineffable John Kerry calls "a few drops of oil." Some drops. The estimated 10.4 billion barrels of recoverable oil -- such estimates frequently underestimate actual yields -- could supply all the oil needs of Kerry's Massachusetts for 75 years.

Flowing at 1 million barrels a day -- equal to 20 percent of today's domestic oil production -- ANWR oil would almost equal America's daily imports from Saudi Arabia. And it would equal the supply loss that Hurricane Katrina temporarily caused, and that caused so much histrionic distress among consumers. Lee Raymond, chairman and CEO of Exxon Mobil, says that if the major oil companies decided that 10 billion barrels were an amount too small to justify exploration and development projects, many current and future projects around the world would be abandoned.

But for many opponents of drilling in the refuge, the debate is only secondarily about energy and the

environment. Rather, it is a disguised debate about elemental political matters.

For some people, environmentalism is collectivism in drag. Such people use environmental causes and rhetoric not to change the political climate for the purpose of environmental improvement. Rather, for them, changing the society's politics is the end, and environmental policies are mere means to that end.

The unending argument in political philosophy concerns constantly adjusting society's balance between freedom and equality. The primary goal of collectivism -- of socialism in Europe and contemporary liberalism in America -- is to enlarge governmental supervision of individuals' lives. This is done in the name of equality.

People are to be conscripted into one large cohort, everyone equal (although not equal in status or power to the governing class) in their status as wards of a self-aggrandizing government. Government says the constant enlargement of its supervising power is necessary for the equitable or efficient allocation of scarce resources.

Therefore, one of the collectivists' tactics is to produce scarcities, particularly of what makes modern society modern -- the energy requisite for social dynamism and individual autonomy. Hence collectivists use environmentalism to advance a collectivizing energy policy. Focusing on one energy source at a time, they stress the environmental hazards of finding, developing, transporting, manufacturing or using oil, natural gas, coal or nuclear power.

A quarter of a century of this tactic applied to ANWR is about 24 years too many. If geologists were to decide that there were only three thimbles of oil beneath area 1002, there would still be something to be said for going down to get them, just to prove that this nation cannot be forever paralyzed by people wielding environmentalism as a cover for collectivism.

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